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SUBJECT: SYRIAN FIRST LADY JOINS IN INAUGURATION OF
USG-FUNDED PROJECTS FOR PALESTINIAN REFUGEES

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter, Reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. CDA participated in the inauguration of the new Ein al-Tal Palestinian refugee camp near Aleppo on September 28 and the Salhiyeh/Balad El-Sheikh School in the Sbeineh Palestinian refugee camp outside Damascus on September 29. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA)-sponsored events highlighted USG assistance to the two projects, which included nearly \$1.2 million for the Ein al-Tal project and \$675,000 for the school in Sbeineh. First Lady Asma al-Asad attended the Ein al-Tal ceremony and proved to be the event's star attraction. Palestinian refugees living in the camps expressed gratitude for the assistance but stressed that more is needed to meet their needs. END SUMMARY.

SYRIAN FIRST LADY IS STAR ATTRACTION AT PALESTINIAN CAMP

¶2. (SBU) First Lady Asma al-Asad made a surprise appearance at the September 28 inauguration of the new Ein al-Tal Palestinian refugee camp near Aleppo, which was constructed with USG assistance. Though not mentioned in the printed materials announcing the event, the First Lady proved the star attraction at the event. The inauguration was also attended by the CDA and representatives of other donor countries including the Swiss Ambassador and the Canadian DCM.

¶3. (SBU) The First Lady arrived at the refugee camp behind the wheel of a silver Audi sedan. During the event's main ceremony, refugee children ran up to the First Lady at intervals to greet her and make requests. One determined woman who had already made a plea to the Minister of Social Affairs and Labor was prevented from speaking to the First Lady. Camp residents gathered on the periphery of the ceremony, cheering at every mention of her or her husband's name (echoing the similarly reactive applause of the invited guests), and schoolchildren occasionally broke into rhythmic slogans pledging loyalty to Bashar al-Asad. A small group of men began chanting that Americans were unwelcome when the CDA was introduced to give remarks, but the First Lady looked with annoyance in their direction and aides quickly quieted them. Before departing the ceremony, she warmly thanked diplomats for their countries' contributions to meeting refugee needs and asked UNRWA representatives to keep her informed of work on the next phase of the project.

¶4. (U) The construction of the Ein al-Tal camp is Phase One of the larger Neirab Rehabilitation Project, meant to move some Palestinian refugees out of the overcrowded Neirab camp nearby. The new camp boasts new homes for 300 refugee families. The September 28 event was the culmination of seven years of work. The total cost of Phase One was about \$35 million. The USG has contributed nearly \$3 million to the Neirab Rehabilitation Project, \$1.2 million of which went towards Phase One. Other donors include the Swiss, Canadians, Germans, and the United Arab Emirates Red Crescent. Phase Two will include the renovation and reconstruction of

schools, clinics, and some shelters in the Neirab camp to improve living conditions for the refugees. In his remarks at the Ein al-Tal ceremony, the CDA noted that the USG is UNRWA's largest bilateral donor and has contributed \$267 million this year.

USG-FUNDED SCHOOL OPENED IN SBEINEH CAMP

15. (SBU) On September 29, the CDA participated in the inauguration of the Salhiyeh/Balad El-Sheikh School in the Sbeineh Palestinian refugee camp, a densely inhabited camp about 45 minutes south of Damascus. The German ambassador also attended the joint ceremony marking the opening of the US-funded Salhiyeh School and the Ma'thar/Saffouriyeh School, reconstructed with German funds. The new school buildings will benefit over 3,000 students living in the Sbeineh camp, which houses over 19,000 Palestinian refugees.

16. (U) While touring the compound, the CDA participated in media interviews with several outlets in English and Arabic, including Syrian television and "Al-Quds" television. All of Syria's major dailies - "Al Watan," "Al Baath," "Tishreen," and "Al Thawra" - carried stories based on SANA's press release that highlighted USG support.

17. (SBU) Director General of the General Administration for Palestinian Refugees (GAPAR) Ali Mustapha represented the SARG in the Sbeineh ceremonies, delivering a speech highly critical of Israel. Praising "our great leader President Asad," Mustapha called on the United Nations to "intervene immediately to put an end to the unjust siege, murder,

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destruction, and attempts at starvation and to stop Israeli aggression in all its forms." Mustapha's remarks received enthusiastic applause from an audience comprised mostly of SARG officials, school officials, and students attending the schools.

REFUGEES EXPRESS GRATITUDE FOR ASSISTANCE, STRESS MORE IS NEEDED

18. (C) Schoolchildren at the Sbeineh schools told Emboffs privately that they were excited about attending classes in the newly renovated schools. Some students stated they hoped to learn English in the schools, and several young boys practiced their English with the CDA. On the crowded streets of the Sbeineh camp leading to the schools' entrance, refugees gathered hoping to catch a glimpse of the SARG officials and foreign visitors. "I heard the wife of the president is here," one woman said. (NOTE: AIO was mistaken upon arrival for the First Lady, and refugee children ran up to her attempting to greet her and touch her. END NOTE) "We don't see visitors from America very often," another woman told Emboff enthusiastically.

19. (C) While the First Lady did not attend, several refugees told Emboff they were happy that foreign diplomats were visiting the camp. "They are here to talk about assistance?" one elderly woman asked. "Good. God willing we will get it. Look around you, everyone here is poor," she added, pointing to the rundown storefronts facing the schools. A young man stressed that more assistance is needed to meet the needs of the camp's refugees. "People come here and talk about projects, but we need ten times these projects to improve the situation here," he said. A policeman listening to the conversation promptly asked the man to leave and directed Emboff inside the school's gates.

110. (C) COMMENT. Though the GAPAR head's remarks on the right of return and Palestinian suffering were lengthier and more strident at the schools than at the camp inauguration, neither event veered into strident anti-Americanism. On the contrary, there was unmistakably a strong desire for continued US support for improving the refugees' living

conditions. END COMMENT.
HUNTER